Preserving State Government Digital Information
Minnesota Historical Society

Needs Assessment

Preserving records is often a main function of a state library or state archives charged with the responsibility of safekeeping state government information of historical significance. Therefore, developing a cost-effective preservation plan should be a primary goal of any such institution. Knowing your collections and the information your records contain is the only way to do this. Without this knowledge you may spend money migrating files to the next technology not knowing that their retention schedule is set to expire the following year, or you may forget to migrate files that require long-term retention and the records may become obsolete before you realize it.

To determine the best preservation solutions for your institution, you will need to look at your records and perform a needs assessment. A needs assessment answers the overarching questions of what do you have, what do you need to keep, and for how long. During the needs assessment you will also be able to identify vital and confidential records, as certain legal requirements, identify records that can be transferred to a records center or destroyed immediately, and review or set retention schedules based on your findings.[1] To assist you, a selection of specific questions aimed at helping you understand and assess your collection is provided at the end of this introduction.

Retention schedules, if they already exist, can serve as a tool during the needs assessment process. Retention schedules lay out the requirements of specific record series by indicating the length of time records need to be kept and detailing any access restrictions to the records. Retention schedules are based on the administrative, financial, legal and historical value of the record series:

> Administrative Value: The usefulness or significance of records to support ancillary operations and the routine management of an organization.[2]
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> Financial Value: The usefulness or significance of records containing financial information that is necessary to conduct current or future business or that serves as evidence of financial transactions.[3]

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[1] Office of State Publishing, Department of General Services. *Records Retention Handbook – Records Appraisal.* State of California. 2007. http://www.osp.dgs.ca.gov/recs/rrhappraisal.htm
[2] Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. The Society of American Archivists. 2005. http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp
[3] Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. The Society of American Archivists. 2005. http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp

> Legal Value: The usefulness or significance of records to document and protect the rights and interests of an individual or organization to provide for defense in litigation, to demonstrate compliance with laws and regulations, or to meet other legal needs.[4]
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> Historical Value: 1. The usefulness or significance of records for understanding the past. 2. The importance or usefulness of records that justifies their continued preservation because of enduring administrative, legal, fiscal, or evidential information they contain; archival value.[5]

Although retention schedules are keyed to these considerations they alone are not good enough when assessing the long-term use value of your records. Some record sets may have a secondary value[6] that may not at first be obvious. Other terms that describe secondary value include use value or research value. For example, birth and death records have a high use value long after their intended administrative use; genealogists use these records to trace family lineage and keeping these records indefinitely is often a common practice.

Use value should be the driving force that justifies the cost of preserving your records. If people are using your records, they are useful, and therefore worth preserving, but you first need to understand what you have and what you want to do with it. Determining use value can be difficult as it means looking into the future to determine if the records can be used in ways other than originally intended. In addition, individual record sets can often be compared to each other or combined to make new information sets with uses different than originally intended. Over time, changes in technology can change the use value of records. New methods of comparison may be developed allowing different comparisons or combinations, possibly altering the use value of your records. One cannot possibly know what people are going to want to see and use in the future, but looking at current trends and periodically reevaluating the materials will help determine if the records actually hold research value over time.

Needs Assessment Questions

A needs assessment is a method for gathering information about your records so they can be evaluated and analyzed on the widest knowledge base possible. Determining the values of the records is a main focus of a needs assessment. Answering *when* and *why* the records were created, *who* created them, and *what* information they contain helps you determine of the overall record value of the records in question.

Answering questions about *when* the records were created helps you understand the background of why they were originally created. Answering questions about *why* the records were created

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[4] Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. The Society of American Archivists. 2005. http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp

[5] Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. The Society of American Archivists. 2005. http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp

[6] Secondary Value: The usefulness or significance of records based on purposes other than that for which they were originally created. Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. The Society of American Archivists. 2005. http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp

helps determine if they hold administrative, fiscal, legal, or historical value which can be used to set an appropriate retention schedule. Answering questions about *who* created the records can provide background information on the author, detail provenance, and establish the authenticity of the record. Answering questions about *what* information is contained in the records helps determine the long-term value of the records based on the content itself.

Asking questions about legal requirements, access and use constraints, metadata, cost concerns, and feasibility of preservation goals is a way to assess risk. The costs and implications of not preserving your records appropriately put your institution at risk for litigation, failing audits, and possibly having to close your doors.

The answers to your needs assessment questions should be used to analyze your records and current records management policies to help determine the level of preservation that should be applied to each record set. You may find that some of your records are more important than others for the long-term functioning of your agency based on your risk assessment and the record's overall use value. Try to preserve records that hold a high level of importance with the 'best' preservation practices, while using 'simple' preservation practices is appropriate for records with lower long-term value. *[The terms 'best' and 'simple' refer to the Preservation Options Grid on the main page of the CAROL Resource Center[7].]*

This list of questions is not exhaustive, but is to get you thinking about what is important when trying to understand and analyze records. The Minnesota Historical Society's *Electronic Records Inventory Worksheet* can also be used to help analyze records.[8]

WHEN

- When were the records created? Do they document an important time period or event? How large or small of a time frame do the records cover?

WHY

- Why were the records created? What function do they/did they serve? Why are they useful?
- Do they have administrative value? Do the records provide evidence of the origin, structure, policies, or procedures of the creating entity? For how long will these files be useful to the creating entity as well as outside parties?
- Do they have fiscal value? Do the records show financial responsibility? How long do they need to be kept? Can they be used to hold the creating institution financially accountable? Might they be used as evidence in a court case?

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[7] CAROL Resource Center. *Preservation.* February 13, 2012. http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/legislativerecords/carol/preservation.htm

[8] Minnesota Historical Society. Electronic Records Inventory Worksheet. June 10, 2004. http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/docs_pdfs/ErecsInventory.pdf Other examples include California: http://www.documents.dgs.ca.gov/osp/pdf/std070.pdf; and Florida: *http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/BARM/forms/RecordsInventoryWorksheet.doc*

- Do they have legal value? For how long? Do they provide evidence of rights, obligations or entitlements of the State or individuals?
- Do they have historical value? For who? Are the records unique? Do they provide information on otherwise poorly documented subjects? Do the materials support operations of the institution?

WHO

- Who created the records? An individual or office? Was the record creator personally involved in the events recorded? Is the record creator an important figure to your institution or to your institution's constituents? Were the records created by more than one person? Is the provenance of the collection documented up to the time you received it?

WHAT

- What information is contained in the record? Are the records useful and accurate? Do the records cover historically significant activities? Do the records serve as an important source of information on a particular topic? Do they provide details of a certain subject area? Is the information reproduced elsewhere?
- How does the collection meet the informational needs and interest of multiple user groups? What informational value do the records hold beyond their initial purpose of creation? Will the research value fluctuate over time?

GENERAL

- How large is the record set? Are there any records missing? If so, what? Can the missing records be added to the record set? Will the collection continue to grow over time?
- What level of processing has been done on the records? Are the records currently in some order?
- What hardware and software was used in creating the records? Can you document the systems used for the length of them the records will be retained?

OVERARCHING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

- What goals exist for electronic records management? What levels of data, appearance, and relationship loss are accessible? What resources are available for processing and maintaining records? What elements of the electronic records need to be kept (e.g., text content only, graphical appearance, interactivity)?
- Is there a collecting plan? Is there a collection management policy? Do the records fit within the collection policy? How?

- Is there a records management policy? Do procedures coordinate with the policy?
- Is there documentation of past and current preservation activities? Is there a current preservation plan? Is it being followed? Is it flexible enough to change over time based on changing technologies?
- Are there best practices that can be identified and applied here in relation to retention schedules, access policies and records use?
- Is there security control over management actions? Are audit logs being used?
- How can the authenticity, reliability, integrity, and usability of the records be determined (ISO 15489-1)?
- Are the records covered under an existing retention schedule? Does a new retention schedule need to be created? What is the process for creating or modifying a retention schedule?
- Is there a disaster recovery plan? Do files need to be accessible immediately after an emergency? How much effort and cost would be required to reconstruct or reproduce the records?
- Are periodic quality assurance and document tests performed? Is there a methodology for ensuring trustworthiness?

LEGAL:

- Are there national, state, or local legal requirements that pertain to these records? Were the records created because of a legislative requirement? Are they regulated by legislation?
- How long are you required to keep the records (retention schedules)?
- Are there any legal risks associated to the collection? Is any data classified as non-public?
- Are there any restrictions on access or use of the records? Are there any legal concerns with holding and providing access to the records?
- Are there any privacy concerns related to the records? Are there any intellectual rights issues related to this collection? Are there any copyrights associated with this collection?

ACCESS:

- Who will need to gain access to these records (internal use only, government agencies, the public)? How often will the files need to be accessed? How will access be provided?
- Are the records open to the public? Are there privacy concerns? Are there physical, intellectual, or legal barriers in providing access to the records? Do certain parts of the record set contain non-public information that must not be disclosed to the public, such as social security numbers or adoption details? Is there a time restriction relating to access to these records?

USE:

- Who will be accessing these records? What is the anticipated demand for records?
- Do the files need to be easily accessible after a disaster?

METADATA:

- What metadata is associated with the collection? What is the main purpose of the associated metadata?
- Were standards used for the metadata? If so, which one(s)?
- What information does it offer to you and users of the data? Does the metadata assist with discovery and access? Does it help identify the document and track provenance? Does it fulfill the institution's preservation needs? Record legal restrictions? Will additional metadata need to be recorded?
- Is the metadata automatically captured? If so, how? If not, how much work does it take and who is doing it? Can it be automated?

FILE FORMAT

- What file formats are the records in? Are the formats currently supported by the institution? Are they appropriate for preservation purposes? Do they meet institutional standards? National standards?
- Will formats need to be migrated in the near future to keep them viable? Do you currently have a conversion plan in place? Will additional hardware/software need to be acquired to care for and access the collection?

STORAGE and STORAGE MEDIA

- What type of files make up the collection? How much space to they take up? Will the amount of space increase over time?
- Where are files currently stored? Are files stored onsite, offsite, or hosted by a third party? Does the location support the appropriate level of access?
- What type of storage media is being used? It is appropriate for the retention period? Will files need to be moved to new storage media to ensure longer term access? How will hardware be maintained and documented? What media documentation is necessary?
- Is access to stored files restricted? Should it be? Are there different policies for internal or external users?

BACK-UPS/RECOVERY COPIES

- Do you have a back-up strategy?

- How often will files be backed up?
- What types of files will be backed up?
- Where will you store back-up files?
- How will you ensure that your back-ups accurately reflect the original content?
- How safe will your files be during a disaster?

STAFF TIME/SKILLS

- How much staff time can you afford to spend on preservation efforts?
- How much staff time will be needed to prepare records for preservation?
- How much staff time will be needed to carry out preservation plans?
- What are the current roles of staff involved? How can you ensure a coordinated process? How can you facilitate planning, communication, and cooperation among involved individuals?

COST-BENEFIT

- How does the research value of the collection compare to the cost of preservation? How much cost and effort would be required to reproduce or reconstruct the records if they were not saved?
- How much money is available to process and preserve the collection? Are the funds project based? Are the funds sustainable over time? What are the expected costs associated with preservation tasks such as migration and conversion over time?
- Are there opportunities available to share costs?